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ABSTRACT

This paper presents research findings and the testimony of educators, students, and researchers demonstrating that small schools meet the essential conditions for providing high-quality education to all students. These essential conditions are: (1) students are known well by their teachers; (2) students are actively engaged in learning and in school activities; and (3) the school provides a secure and caring environment. When kids belong and are engaged, they are "available" to learn. In addition, students who belong to a school community are far less likely to commit acts of vandalism or assault, are truant less often, and are less apathetic than students in large depersonalized schools. This becomes especially important in light of the growing number of alienated at-risk youth from dysfunctional families. Small schools have been criticized for their limited course offerings, but these very limits can lead to a focused coherent academic program that develops deeper understanding, connections across knowledge areas, and critical thinking skills. The community aspects of the small school, together with the need for academic coherence and interdisciplinary connections foster collegiality among teachers. While common sense and recent research clearly favor the small school environment, we remain wedded to powerful images of the comprehensive high school, spawned during the very different social and educational conditions of the 1950s. Moving beyond this nostalgic vision of "high school" may be the hardest step in educational improvement. (SV)

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Small Is Beautiful

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Coalition of Essential Schools

RC 019323

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By Bethany Rogers[1]

Small is beautiful. It so happens that small also is very effective. While we at the Coalition of Essential Schools are convinced of the truth of this, we realize that the burden is on us—in an America where "bigger is better" has been a favored maxim—to demonstrate why. From those who work in the schools, we hear perhaps some of the most compelling evidence of the advantages that accrue to both students and teachers in small school communities compared with those afforded by the traditional comprehensive high schools. Having listened over time to school people, we at the Coalition are convinced that the advantages of small schools go directly to the heart of good teaching and learning. We hope to establish the value of small school size by presenting some of these advantages—with the help of voices from the field—to you today.

In the vanguard of New York City school reform, Superintendent Joseph Fernandez and Deborah Meier, the principal of the stunningly successful Central Park East Secondary School, have devised a bellwether plan to improve the city's public schools by dividing them into smaller, distinctive units (300 to 1000 students each). The plan will

> create thirty small high schools over three years that would focus on themes. . . . The aim is to start to break down the impersonal, amorphous quality of instruction offered in the city's 124 behemoth high schools.[2]

No doubt, there is a "small" revolution happening (pun intended) in the nation's efforts to reform our public schools, which advocates breaking our comprehensive high schools down into smaller units. The big, sprawling high school, with its showy cornucopia of electives, has defined the pinnacle of secondary education in many places across our country—from Edina, Minnesota to the Bronx. So why is this citadel now being attacked? Why rethink and change

it? The answer lies in our conviction that school size has an impact on the quality of education: smaller schools lead to higher quality education.

Research results indicate a strong correlation between small schools and higher student achievement.[3] To this evidence, we would add the personal and the anecdotal, so that our response here weaves together the testimony of practitioners and researchers—most notably, those affiliated with the Coalition of Essential Schools. These colleagues know schools: They have succeeded in creating school environments where kids demonstrably do what they are "not supposed to do"—i.e., they attend school, they publicly display their knowledge and skills, they graduate, and they proceed in overwhelming numbers to colleges and universities; or they have worked at the forefront of research efforts to push forward in theory and practice what we know about how kids learn best. These voices, in some rare and refreshing instances, also belong to kids who know what it means to be engaged in their education and who are thoughtful and articulate enough to share their observations. What we find in talking with such folks is that they, in large measure, agree: The quality of a school—the degree to which it can be called a "good" school—depends somewhat on that school being of a wieldy and workable size.

Most of the images of school and schooling put forth by the popular culture show little change from the 1950s, when a much smaller, homogeneous population attended high school. The fiction of these images is sadly accurate on one count: In spite of the significantly larger, increasingly heterogeneous throng of adolescents enrolled in high school today, little has changed in the practice of our schools and their approach to students and learning.

Because of this disjuncture—the world has changed dramatically and schools have not—the education provided by these anachronistic institutions has failed to prepare students to meet the

shifting demands of this new world. What we face now is a crucial need to revisit the very purpose and processes of schools. What does it mean to be educated in today's society of global competition? What does it mean to be literate in a world which communicates and conveys information through varied forms of expression far beyond simple text? What does it mean to provide an equal education to those kids who grow up in society's most dire and egregious conditions?

In answering these fundamental questions about education, we propose three essential conditions which, when present, enable schools to provide serious, high-quality education for all of their students. Though these conditions will not appear in the same form from school to school, they are held in common among those schools that we consider "good." Schools that do well by all of their kids are places supportive of, and suffused with, these three qualities. What is of particular interest for our purposes here is how these conditions argue—explicitly or implicitly—for the smaller school.

Kids Must Be Known.

Kids must be known and known well by the educators in the school in order to get a crackling good education—everything else flows from this, the metaphorical heart of good schooling. The reasoning is straightforward. If we don't know our students well enough to understand how their minds work, we can't teach them well. How will we know, if we do not know Susie and her intellectual predilections, whether the mistake she makes on a math test was a careless arithmetic error or a lack of comprehension of the basic mathematical concept or even the result of problems at home? Since kids learn differently, at different rates and through different

means, schools must avoid the sort of "batch processing" of kids that typically goes on at big high schools where size impedes personalization, and instead look to create conditions that enable teachers to personalize and tailor students' education.[4] Optimally, such conditions would allow teachers to know the kids they teach (over time if possible), to talk with colleagues about kids they teach in common, and to provide a stable and caring environment. These are conditions undeniably easier to achieve in a small school than in a large one.

At a small school, it is quite possible for kids to have the same teachers over a number of years. This not only maximizes the personal nature of the relationships between student and teacher, but allows the relationship to develop over time and over the progression of the student's achievement. Teachers gain familiarity with students' work and with their lives outside of school, broadening their perspective on the students' potential and their gains beyond the short window offered by one single semester. School becomes accordingly less institutional, warmer, and more personal for kids through friendly and respectful contact with adults.

Engaging Kids

Deborah Meier is a strong believer that size and scale are critical to drawing all kids into active engagement. Huge, anonymous high schools "depersonalize" the work of learning, where "all but a few stars become lookers-on, admirers, or wallflowers, not active participants."[5] We know enough about teaching and learning to recognize the value of engaging each child in active learning; and engaging a child in learning means having an informed hunch of what might interest that particular student. It all comes back to knowing again, this to be gained in a rich way over time. No longer is it enough to teach to a small slice of kids—*all* students must be

given the opportunity to participate, and further, to come to know and respect their obligations and responsibilities as citizens and members of a community—schoolwide and beyond. Small schools can offer that opportunity in ways no large school ever could.

Caring Environment: Laying a Foundation for Learning

Oak Hill High School,[6] situated in a picturesque small town in New York, has just over 300 students in grades 9-12. The school has been characterized as "safe and trusting," a "caring" kind of place. In the case of Oak Hill, kids are known and size has something to do with it. The students themselves offer testimony:

> Our teachers are our friends. We can talk to them. We know them really well. Besides teaching, they coach us in sports. We go on trips together—like to France if you make it to French IV.
>
> A lot of our teachers are our friends. Some of them. . .develop real relationships with us. We can go to them when we need help.
>
> There aren't cliques here. We have all grown up together since kindergarten, so we know each other pretty well.
>
> We are like a family here.[7]

Though the words of these students are culled from long interviews which concerned many different aspects of what it is like for them to attend Oak Hill High School, the degree to which their stories reflect the recurrent theme of *being known* is significant. They recognize what it is to be known, the distinguishing quality of the relationships with teachers and with peers, and it shapes their experience.

At Simon Gratz High School, located in a low-income, minority neighborhood in North Philadelphia, students of the Crossroads program and their parents talked to reporters for a

recent NBC special report on education and evidenced the same consciousness of how being known is being cared about, with all of the immediacy of contact and accountability that such entails. The process of knowing kids is helped here by the fact that the program consists of only 250 kids in grades ten through twelve, this number matched to a team of nine teachers. Parents have noted the difference, likening Gratz to "a family atmosphere. . . [where] teachers really show that they care."[8] Though Gratz parents historically have been uninvolved in their children's education, that is changing. Parents are seeing the teachers' attitude ("What you have to do is personalize your relationship with the kids. . . and you have to develop some kind of relationship.") and recognizing how the relationships allow the teachers to "expect the most from their students."[9] In the Crossroads program at Simon Gratz High School, the cultivation of relationships between teachers and students has made it possible for teachers to respect their students by holding them to high expectations—after all, they *know* what their students are capable of.

Given the opportunity to start a school from scratch, Bob Cresswell made sure that it was of a small and workable size. Cresswell, principal of a new high school in an ex-urb of Atlanta, Georgia, says that without a doubt, a small group allows for a terribly important intimacy. This "climate of caring," as he characterizes it, is invaluable to the work of teaching.

Caring is fine, but what about *learning*? Or, as the research going on at Oak Hill probes, is this "caring environment" where kids are known, crucial as it may be, enough? Gene Maeroff, senior fellow at the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, argues that the advantage of "being known," facilitated by small schools, is precisely the point: "Once this happens, all things are possible. Without it, many students will never feel a stake in their

education."[10] When schools are viewed by students as hostile environments or, more benignly, indifferent or impersonal, why should we expect them to feel invested in such a place? One might take as an example a translation of Mazlow's hierarchy—if simple, interpersonal functioning is at a premium, the attendant anxieties drain students' energies from their involvement in learning. Small size allows the sorts of relationships which engender respect and high expectations—going both ways—to develop comfortably. And though intangible, those qualities are essential for serious learning to occur.

If we believe, then, that the learning *environment* affects learning, creating the conditions of "caring" should be paramount. And, in fact, school environments where students are secure and comfortable in their relationships with teachers and peers are often described by students as a "family" atmosphere. A veteran headmaster (principal) of a Boston public school, Sidney Smith extends the comparison to account for size: "No one would like to have a family of two parents and 47 children—you can't manage it." Because we often ask that schools do well what families used to do, and also because, as Smith says, "space breaks things down" and diffuses intimacy, we think, quite obviously, that bigness mitigates.

Psychology of Adolescence

When kids belong, they are engaged, they are "available" to learn and be taught. However, behind the pedagogical justification which argues for small schools where kids can easily be known, there is a psychological advantage as well. Adolescence is a time of craving acceptance, ways to fit in, a sense of *belonging*. In a large school where anonymity is the rule, kids go to what we might consider foolish lengths in order to gain attention and acceptance. The least

damaging possibility is that kids might learn less, but the need to belong can be distorted into more harmful forms, as Judy Codding well knows.

Codding is the principal of what she terms an unfortunately large—2,200-2,400 students—urban high school in Pasadena, California. In the four years she has been there, she has devoted her energy to countering her students' alienation and apathy: They saw no reason to be in school because the school didn't know them and didn't give them any sense of caring. In her opinion, "bigness yields this," and she redefined the mammoth school by breaking it into manageable units. As a tangible result, she is keeping more kids in school. That youngsters "succeed better with a sense of intimacy" is for Codding "true, not just hyperbole." She boldly created a climate of caring through smaller units because, as she tells it, "I don't see any other choice."

From her experience, Codding speaks compellingly of how important it is in particular for her charges—urban, minority youths growing up in an environment of poverty and violence—to feel and be told that they are important and capable. For many of them, she explains, there is no "family" in the way we talk about it in mainstream American culture. A lot of these kids lead profoundly disconnected personal lives, devoid of the kinds of mutual commitments associated with familial relations.

Kids who are so often forgotten, or at the least marginalized and unacknowledged by society, are directed by little more than rage and frustration which is, Codding believes, an inevitable by-product of the anonymity which haunts all aspects of their young lives. What happens to the natural desire to fit in when it is exposed to the pressure cooker circumstances which characterize these children's experiences? Codding tells us it is no mistake that these

adolescents are members of gangs—small, supportive "families" in their own right. In spite of the well-known consequences—both public and painfully personal—for many members, Codding avers, "the very nature of the lack of connection drives this impetus."

The lack of connection that leads some disenfranchised kids to join gangs is frighteningly pervasive, invading even those communities we think of as "safe." Sid Smith believes that *all* kids need a sense of community; that need doesn't stop at the city line. Kids from well-off homes and intact families are increasingly subject to the despair and anonymity associated with urban students. The changes taking place in suburban families—absent parents, working mothers, economic hardship—coupled with our growing recognition of what has always existed but has never been acknowledged in such families—the problems of abuse, neglect, and abandonment—have taken a toll. Relatively high incidences of suicide at exclusive boarding schools and an alarming upward trend in eating disorders which affect girls from middle-and upper-class backgrounds are evidence, in some fashion, of *kids out of relation.*

The message is clear: Many of today's youth from across the spectrum are disaffected and disconnected. We believe that small schools are an effective part of the solution. The record of Essential schools that are making significant progress shows that a sharp reduction in the number of kids for whom each adult is responsible has profound effects on those youngsters—to their great benefit. Small schools result in a community where students more readily feel they belong and where they are provided the acknowledgment and affirmation they need. As part of a school community, students are far less likely to commit acts of vandalism or assault. Those who attend small schools are truant less often and less apathetic than their counterparts at large schools. The kids in the Crossroads program at Simon Gratz High School offer a good

example: Since its inception, attendance is up 15 percent and the drop-out rate has decreased.

In creating a sense of community and sanctuary that draws kids, the small school environment goes a long way toward preparing and enabling youngsters to concentrate on learning. When one is safe, cared for, and respected, it is plausible to become engaged in the activities of learning. However, unless the crushing anonymity of the high schools—even the middle-sized ones, much less the big ones—is addressed, the docility, distraction and departure of many of these kids will continue at an alarming rate.

Academic Coherence

We believe that a school's purpose is to help kids learn to use their minds well. Schools shouldn't attempt to be "comprehensive" if such a claim is made at the expense of that central purpose; instead, they ought to be simple in structure so that the learning which goes on there can be complex. "Simple in structure" implies a serious focusing of the academic program, which lends it coherence—even from the perspective of the students. Because today's students are already exposed to so many influences and stimuli outside of schools, they no longer need the school to provide the variety in their lives. On the contrary, what schools most helpfully can provide for students is that sense of concentration or coherence which many kids lack in their lives outside of schools.[11]

One of the great fortunes of small schools, though they can't offer the diversity of courses which might be found in a large school, is their ability to develop strength in a few areas of inquiry. That is, small schools can ensure that the limited number of courses they offer will all be rich, meaningful, and *substantive*. One of the Coalition maxims, "less is more," encourages

this choosiness about content that allows students and teachers to simplify the breadth of coverage, but to go deep in those areas perceived to be most important.

Ironically, by offering students less, in the way of choices and levels, students can actually gain more from their learning, in terms of deeper understanding, connections across knowledge areas, and skills of critical thinking. A recent study on New York City schools by the Rand Corporation found that most of the students in their study sample would have learned more from a "simpler, centripetal curricula."[12] A small school is suited to focus on doing a few things well, whereas the temptation of the large school is to try to offer something for everyone—the breadth of such practice making it much harder to maintain high-quality academic standards across the board.

The fewer course offerings in a small school also fosters the spirit of community. The focused program allows everyone to be engaged in the same few areas of deep inquiry, engendering a feeling of shared enterprise and collegiality nearly unthinkable in big schools. The comprehensive high school, on the other hand, is characterized by an abundance of choices (a broad array of subjects and levels at which they can be learned), which not only diffuses the academic purpose, but divides kids, actually perpetuating and even exacerbating the inequalities—in particular of class and race—inherent in the school population. For instance, consistent choices of voc ed courses or college preparatory math courses are not "equal" in their likely effect on a child's future. While all kids learn differently and are interested in different things, the rigidly differentiated tracks in big high schools—often the result of choices made in the early years of high school and of perceived ability level—may determine to what level children will achieve and aspire, quite apart from any natural capabilities the child may or may

not have. That the tracking distinctions (which kids have what "ability") are made so often on the basis of scores from tests we decry is even more damning.

Thus the poetry of small scale is in its very limits, which circumscribe a shared course of learning that is simple, deep and coherent.

Environment: The Small School Community

The solution for the problems of anonymity and incoherence is, happily, the same, and it lies largely in the *organizational* benefits of small schools. The organization of a school affects deeply and even determines whether or not either of the first conditions—kids being known and the coherence of the academic experience—will be allowed to take hold.

In thinking about the organization of the school, we might gain insight into general principles of social organization from the realm of political philosophy. Jean Jacques Rousseau's treatise on the social contract favors the relative strength of a small state compared to a large one, because:

> not only does the [too large] government act less firmly and less speedily in compelling the observance of the laws, in preventing unfairness, correcting abuses. . . but the People have less affection for their rulers, whom they never see, for their country, which is no closer to them than the world at large, and for their fellow citizens, many of whom they do not even know. . . When a great multitude. . . are brought together by the concentration of a central government in one place, talents lie buried, virtues are ignored and vices tend to remain unpunished. The rulers, overburdened with work, have first hand knowledge of nothing."[13]

Small schools, like small states, offer a better opportunity for community-building: With fewer individuals, a genuine general will can be fostered which faithfully represents those involved. When the school is small enough to work as a "place of shared visions and common

values," the school functions as a community. We can see in current political rhetoric—in the proposals for enterprise zones, for example—the preference for "community-based services" over centrally administered services, precisely because the strength of the bonds and responsibilities that come from relationships among people promise a better chance of successful delivery of those services.

The earlier-cited Rand study on New York City schools confirms the contributions of small size to quality schooling. The researchers discovered in their study two characteristics which predispose to success what they dub "focus schools." Focus schools are those which are distinguished by a "clear, uncomplicated mission," and which are strong, autonomous organizations "with the capacity to act."[14] As schools with unique identities and missions, focus schools also provide the possibility of real alternatives from which teachers, parents, and students can choose. It is hard to imagine a large school, hostage to all of the administrative procedures and regulations and hierarchical suspicion inherent in its functioning, capable of acting in such concert in any timely manner.

A small school which operates as a community is governed by a system of working relations—you can trust and respect folks you know—rather than by formal or written rules. This kind of "authority" improves relations among staff and student body alike. Teachers need to feel that they belong and are valued, they need to feel that they are heard rather than being at the tail end of a long chain of command. Because consensus is easier to achieve within a small group, small schools can promote a "pancaked" hierarchy that responds to these needs in ways no large school can. When staff meetings are small enough to take place in a single classroom, and when an afternoon in-service meeting provides time enough for every person to

be heard, ownership and responsiveness increase exponentially. Certainly, those adult working relations at the school have a bearing on the culture of that school: healthier, more collegial relations among the staff engender the same with and among students.

The context likewise informs the intellectual habits of the school. To satisfy the need for academic coherence, themes and concepts can be connected across disciplines, and coordinated, focused lessons can be created through purposeful and effective interdisciplinary and integrated classes. However, this requires collaboration among faculty and, not unimportantly, a schedule which is simple enough to absorb new shapes. The collegiality necessary to make such a flexible structure work is more easily accomplished by small, intimate environments than large diffuse ones. And when an entire staff can be involved in any and all curriculum and instruction decisions and can introduce and gain consensus on new initiatives in a single afternoon meeting, curriculum instruction and scheduling options that could never be accommodated in a larger school begin to open up.

Only from such a small, cohesive environment can an authentic "common set of understandings" arise and give shape to standards that likewise embody shared values. The small environment means that these standards articulate more accurately the outcomes—what graduates should know and be able to do—desired by the school's constituency. Further, small schools, by virtue of their inherently more flexible structure, can afford to allow some room for dispute and response around those standards and the achievement of them. One empirical study which attends to the conditions of small schools finds that, in the most simplistic evaluation terms, it is harder to monitor student progress in larger schools.[15] We know that administration

is more cumbersome in bigger than in smaller organizations; it is no surprise that it is also tougher to assess, in thoughtful and varied ways, the progress of many rather than fewer.

The stories of Essential school people across the country testify to the importance of how the insides of schools are fashioned, how those schools are kept. Schools which are small and tightly knit become microcosms: they are little communities—with all the senses of common interest, participation and identity and purpose the term implies—which support learning.

The Argument for the Large School

So why, when common sense and recent research so clearly favor the small school environment, do we remain wedded to the idea of the comprehensive high school? Our attachment is rooted in some very powerful nostalgia, more comprehensible perhaps if we revisit the time and place which spawned it.

In the "good old days" before the late 1950s, poor kids, minority kids, "marginal" kids a substantial portion of the adolescent population—didn't attend high school. Average school completion level among American soldiers during World War II was at about eighth grade. Contrast that to the Americans who fought in Viet Nam: the school completion level hovered somewhere near the twelfth grade, in spite of the fact that military recruitment relied far more heavily on individuals from low-income backgrounds. Thus the 1950s witnessed the revolutionary reality of *mass secondary education*. Not only were more kids from a broader demographic spectrum attending school, but as the beginning of the baby boom hit, schools were faced with a dramatic increase in the absolute number of adolescents as well. It could be said that the growth industry of the 1950s was, in fact, high school.

Beyond simple numbers, however, post-World War II America demanded a retooled sort of schooling, capable of addressing the challenges posed by the Cold War, the mandate for racial integration, and the broad realization of the American dream. The fear that America was losing ground—Sputnik still a stinging memory—was palpable. James Bryant Conant was the right man at the right time, with a solution, a vision of a system that never existed before, that was, appropriately, uniquely American.

Conant, an ex-president of Harvard University, a renowned scientist and a political appointee, held a well-developed sense of the purpose of education. He was convinced that high schools needed to prepare adolescents with the projected needs of the community in mind, and that the schools shouldn't be wasting many kids' time by feeding them academic subjects after a certain point. His views assume a division of labor in the society and suggest ability grouping in schools, a stance that he justified on the basis that such respected individual differences and would provide something for everyone. Because he also believed that all honest labor shared an equality of status, the "differences" were not valued differently as far as Conant was concerned.

With this philosophical indifference to whether a youngster ended up a brick layer or a neurosurgeon, the acceptance in schools of different abilities could be recognized and provided for without privileging or shortchanging anyone. Conant's Platonic vision of the comprehensive high school, then, provided something for everyone—with all educational paths routing students to different, but equal, ends. Counselors would be employed to guide kids into the various tracks, according to their perceived ability. Recognizable in many of today's schools are characteristics of Conant's vision, including the provision of a general education for all citizens

(intended to offer a foundation for participation in our democratic society); good elective programs to equip kids for all sorts of work; satisfactory college preparatory courses; and special attention for the gifted.

But we have a new world order to contend with today—America is a very different place from what it was forty years ago. The population is increasingly diverse and the conditions of many kids going to school today has degenerated terribly from those in the past. In addition to that, we know a lot more, based on our experiences with large high schools. We know that the rhetoric—all paths lead to equal ends—is rarely authentic. We know that the tests used to set kids on lifelong paths are often shamefully narrow and one-dimensional; some are biased, others simply inaccurate. And finally, we expect a lot more today than we ever have before. Increasingly, political wisdom links global competitiveness and a healthy economy to improved education of *all* of our kids. While downsizing schools is not sufficient to achieve improved education for all of our youngsters, it is a steady and solid step in the right direction.

Moving beyond the vision of "high school" as it was conceived in the crucible of the Conant years is the hardest step. Devising practical solutions and innovative ways to create small school environments is relatively easy because it simply involves resourceful thinking about how to arrive at the particular point of small environments.[16] What challenges us is the charge to radically redirect our thinking—following the precepts of what we know about how kids learn best—toward the small, the particular . . . the beautiful.

ENDNOTES

1. With assistance from Theodore R. Sizer. We are indebted to many of our colleagues as well for their generous input, especially Judy Codding, Bob Cresswell, Heather Lewis, Deborah Meier, and Patricia Wasley. Sid Smith's contributions of experience and editing were invaluable.

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16. For instance, even in the face of urgings to consolidate rural districts, the use of modern telecommunications technology can bring to small schools courses which might otherwise not

be offered, services can be shared or pooled, and large schools, like that of Judy Codding, can decentralize into "houses" or units.